

What in Hell was that?

-conversations from Hades (Luke 16:19-31)

Introduction

Now if you were just half awake before the slide flashed on the screen, I hope you are now fully awake. “What in Hell was that?” Before anyone accuses me of swearing from the pulpit, let me explain the title of the sermon today. Noah brought us the gospel reading from Luke 16:19-31 about the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus, conversations from Hell. In fact that is the only time in the entire bible that we get a direct testimony (for the want of a better word) from a hell-dweller. What was that about? So what I propose to do this morning is to answer that question: What in Hell was going on?

Luke 16:19. The Rich Man and Lazarus. This is a familiar story told by our Lord Jesus that we know well. Don't know about you but for me, when something becomes too familiar, I tend to go “alright, I know this, NEXT!, move on”. But this is a story told by Jesus, the master storyteller, and it only appears in Luke's gospel and not in the other gospels. It is therefore unique. What I am going to do is to help unpack it for us in 3 stages: 1) observe what the text itself says; 2) understand its meaning. Part of how we understand it, is by knowing some background information which I will give you; and 3) how it applies to us today.

Observe

The story is told in two parts—in the first part, there is a narrative that introduces the characters of the plot and sets the scene; and in the second, there is dialogue consisting of three exchanges between the rich man and Abraham. And if we take a step back, this story is placed within the context of the parables of the lost sheep, the lost

coin, and the lost son, in the chapter before. And the parable of the shrewd manager in the first part of chapter 16. Our story comes at the end of chapter 16. Jesus' audience for these parables include not only his disciples but also the Pharisees (Lk 15:1, 16:1,14).

Our story starts in the same style as the two preceding parables of the lost son and the shrewd manager. In the parable of the lost son, "here was a man with two sons", in the parable of the shrewd manager "there was a rich man with his manager". And here, "there was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen". So we know that our story starts life as a parable* but with a very curious abnormality-nowhere else in any of the other parables are the characters given a name. Here we have a name for one of its characters, Lazarus. What's more curious is that Lazarus isn't the main character of our story. He doesn't even speak. But I think there is a special reason for naming Lazarus and I'll come to it later.

(parable: a story told to demonstrate some truth, not necessarily describing actual events that took place)*

In its essence, this parable is a parable of contrasts and the complete reversal of fortunes of two people. Further, it is not only a simple contrast, it is a stark and extreme contrast between two people, two lifestyles, two ways of thinking, and of course in the most extreme of contrasts we can think of, the extreme contrast between heaven and hell. You see that from the key words Jesus uses in the parable to demonstrate this truth.

[SLIDE] *Luke 16:19 There was a man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and he feasted sumptuously every day.*

In one brilliant line, Jesus paints for us the picture of this rich man. He was not merely rich. He was filthy rich. Why do I say that?

- 1) He “was clothed”. He didn’t have to dress himself, someone dressed him. All he probably had to do in the morning was to decide: “hmmm, which shade of purple should I put on today?”

- 2) He was clothed in what? Purple and fine linen. In those days purple dye was extremely expensive to produce. The purple dye was extracted from seashells. These were boiled for days to release a purple colour and a horrible stench. This dye was worth its weight in gold. The fabric to make purple clothes had to be dipped into this expensive dye and only kings or the very rich could afford it. That’s why even today we associate the colour purple with royalty. Because only kings could afford purple! So this man wore purple and wore fine linen too. This fine linen was made from expensive Egyptian cotton, which even today you may know, is still considered the best cotton in the world. But what you may not know is that what they called “fine linen” in those times, is what we call “undergarments” today. This man was dressed not only in fancy designer gear on the outside, he also wore fancy designer underwear of the best kind on the inside.

- 3) He “feasted sumptuously” everyday. That’s the ESV translation which although isn’t a literal translation, it is an accurate interpretation. In the original Greek, the word translated as “feasted” means “making merry”. But what does that mean? In Luke 15 in the parable of the lost son, the same word is used there when the son returns and what does the Father do? He makes merry. There we know that making merry was

slaughtering the fattened cow and throwing a huge party. So our rich man feasted and partied “sumptuously”. The word translated sumptuous here, is the same Greek root word used also to describe, elsewhere in the bible, the shiny brilliant clothes of angels. So not only did this man have a huge party, it was of the extreme shiny brilliant type, and what was more? He had such a huge shiny brilliant party every single day!!

The genius of Jesus! In just 14 Greek words, he paints for us one extreme scene. Now follow me to the next verse. I told you that this parable is in essence a parable of contrasts, so what can we reasonably expect in the next verse? Jesus paints the other extreme: Abject poverty. But Lazarus was not only poor, he was ill, likely crippled, and had some skin disease resulting in disgusting open oozing sores.

[SLIDE] *Luke 16:20-21 At his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.*

Doesn't sound so extreme, does it? It doesn't until I give you a bit more information about this description.

- 1) He “was laid” at the rich man's gate. This a mild translation. The idea behind this word “was laid”, is to be thrown, to be cast down. This is the same word Satan used in the temptation of Jesus when he told Jesus to “throw” himself from the top of the temple. Lazarus was most likely crippled and thrown there by someone who didn't want to take care of him or had no means to take care of him.

2) Lazarus was so poor he desired to be fed with crumbs from the rich man's table. Do you remember the conversation Jesus had in Matt 15:21-28 with the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus to heal her demon-possessed daughter? Jesus wanted to test her faith and said that it wasn't right to take from the children's table and throw it to the dogs. What did the woman reply? She said: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table". Lazarus was so poor, so denigrated that he considered himself no better than a stray dog. What's worse was that, he was treated worse than even a dog - those dogs received crumbs, Lazarus didn't even get a morsel.

Do you see the extreme contrast now? Rich man: denies himself nothing, full of himself. Poor man: has nothing, considers himself worse than a dog. Now the story gets better.

[SLIDE] v.22 *The poor man dies and was carried by angels to Abraham's side.*

No burial mentioned. But of course, who's going to bury him? The rich man dies, gets buried, and goes to Hades. Did you notice how Jesus changes the order of mention of the two men? The important people are usually mentioned first, right? But what happens here? Now Lazarus is mentioned first because their fortunes are now in complete reversal. To understand how complete that is you must understand also that to the Jewish audience hearing this parable, there is no other greater Jewish hero than Abraham in Jewish history. He is the father of the Jewish race. He is the type of guy that without question, you give the place of honour to at any banquet. And Lazarus, gets carried to

Abraham's side (some translations even say Abraham's bosom) which means Lazarus gets the 2nd most important place at the banquet!

[SLIDE] v.23

(v.23) The rich man being in torment in Hades sees Abraham and Lazarus and what does he do? Does he now finally realise that he has led a futile life? Do we see any shred of recognition of wrongdoing or any repentance in him? Does he even call out to God for help? No!!

C.S. Lewis writes that at the end of the day, there are two kinds of people; the first kind says to God: "Thy will be done", and the second kind God says to them: "Thy will be done". Even in hell, the rich man holds on to his pride of position, his pride of ethnicity, his pride of intellect. The rich man suffers but what he refuses to see is that he himself is the source of his suffering. Bible commentator John MacArthur says: "Hell isn't rehabilitative, it is retributive". If one has never acknowledged God and has never fallen in repentance before God for the wrongs done in this life, then he or she will also never repent even in hell and even in torment. Hell isn't rehabilitative.

From here it gets interesting. The narrative turns into a dialogue with three exchanges between the rich man and Abraham. Now we get a unique testimony from hell or hades if you have the ESV translation. In the New Testament, the word "hades" and "hell" are often interchangeably translated.

[SLIDE] v.24-26

(v.24) The rich man addresses Abraham. Do you find that strange? He doesn't know Abraham personally, Lazarus he knows, he has been passing him every single day

outside his gate! Even in hell, the rich man considers Lazarus to be beneath him to talk to, and he still considers Lazarus as someone to be ordered around, who is useful only in so far as to serve the rich man. Then the rich man plays the race card. He calls out to “Father” Abraham. He tells Abraham, I belong to your race of people! Therefore you must help me. But Abraham replies that even if he wanted to help him, he cannot because a “great chasm has been fixed” between heaven and hell and no one can go from one to the other. I have sometimes heard this argument: “Now surely, a merciful and loving God will never have created this fixed gulf between heaven and hell!” Or to put it in another way: a loving God will never send someone to hell.

I think the gulf is not fixed because God is nursing a cosmic and eternal grudge against people for not accepting the gift of his son Jesus. (You have seen how Jesus describes the rich man’s state of non-repentance even in hell). I think the gulf has been fixed by the stubbornness of the human heart and the justice of God. Those who justify themselves on earth, will continue to justify themselves in hell. Yes God is all merciful and all loving, but God is also a God of justice, and justice demands that wrongdoings must be paid for. God cannot act against his own character. And the wonderful message of the gospel is that God himself has paid for all the wrongdoings through the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross of Calvary. But the rich man first needs to see that he is wrong. And here we see no shred of repentance. D. A. Carson, professor of the New Testament, states that there is nowhere in the bible that we get any hint of repentance of those in hell. Hell is not rehabilitative.

[SLIDE] v.27-29

(v.27) Abraham's answer doesn't satisfy the rich man. He still wants his way. He still wants Lazarus to be ordered around to do his will. Send Lazarus then to my brothers to warn them. But Abraham replies that they have Moses and the Prophets to warn them. What does he mean by Moses and the Prophets? In today's language, Abraham would say: "They have the Bible". But what does that mean, they have a book??! It means that they have been given the knowledge and the means for salvation. They cannot claim ignorance. They should know from the Bible that no one can by his own strength, in our sinful nature, justify himself before God. They should know that God promised that He himself will provide a way for man to restore that broken relationship with God. They should know that God will send a sacrificial Lamb to pay for the sins of all people. We should know that there is none righteous before God. But God, while we were still his enemies, sent Jesus the sacrificial Lamb to die on our behalf so that in Jesus we can be called sons and daughters of God and be restored to a full and complete union with God. They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to the words of promise and salvation that is plain from the Bible. (Romans 10:17) Faith comes through hearing, and hearing from the word of God. We have Moses and the Prophets.

[SLIDE] v.30-31

But does the rich man now finally get it? No. He still continues to justify himself by arguing with Abraham! This time he claims that Abraham has gotten his salvation methodology all wrong (v.30) No, the bible is not enough. But if someone rises from the dead, then they will listen. Then Abraham replies that if they do not heed the bible, then even if someone rises from the dead, they will still not be convinced. This verse takes on more poignancy because Luke in writing this gospel, knew that there was someone who rose from the dead. Luke by the end of his book in chapters 23 and 24 describes in detail

the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And I daresay, even among us today, there are those who **still** do not believe **even with** all the evidence presented. How often have I heard this argument: “You can’t believe everything in the bible, it’s been passed down through so many years and so many hands! Can’t be accurate! These are just stories and myths written years after the fact”. Archeology, historians, scholars of ancient books, have time and time again proved the Bible to be true and that the eye-witness accounts described in the bible to be accurate. What more do we need?

The crux of believing does not lie with physical evidence nor is it because one hasn’t seen a miracle. It lies in the hardness of the human heart, so that while seeing we do not see, and while hearing we do not hear (Matt 13:13). In the clearest demonstration of this fact, in John 11 we have the account of Jesus raising the brother of Mary and Martha who had been dead 4 days. We are told there that there were some who saw the miracle and believed, but there were others who saw the miracle and went to the Pharisees to report it and in doing so started the process which lead to Jesus’ crucifixion and death. The crux of believing does not lie with having enough physical evidence nor even in the witness of a miracle. It lies in the hardness of the human heart.

You know what’s so interesting about the raising of Mary and Martha’s brother? What’s his name? Lazarus. I was thinking about this very strange coincidence between his name and the Lazarus in our parable; and it dawned on me that what a God of mercy and justice we serve! Because in the end, God in his mercy did hear the rich man’s plea and God sent Lazarus, God raised Lazarus, the brother of Mary so that some may come to believe. Our just God raised Lazarus so that the rich man can never say: “How do you know if you never tried?”

The self-justifying man will find absolutely no excuse under the justice and mercy of a perfectly loving God. It boggles my mind that God would accede to a plea of a self-seeking, prideful and unrepentant man, who showed no mercy to a cripple at his gate and who doesn't acknowledge God even in hell. But this is how great our God is, his mercy and love extends even to the one who doesn't deserve it, and who doesn't acknowledge him.

That was the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. I am going to conclude with some reflections and practical takeaways.

1) Firstly, hell is real. Jesus talked more about hell than about heaven when he walked this earth. We shouldn't need to shy away from talking about the reality of hell. But please understand that telling someone that they are going to burn in hell for eternity isn't going to get you very far these days. Even if it does, you will get a convert who only wishes to escape the fires of hell and not because he longs for heaven. Exercise sensitivity and a bit of common sense.

2) Second, hell is real but heaven is so much more what we can even hope or imagine. 1 Cor 2:9 says: No eye has seen, no ear has heard what God has prepared for those who love him. We shouldn't be afraid to talk about hell but we have also dumbed down heaven so much that people think of heaven as a bunch of chubby, curly-haired kids with wings playing harps and bouncing on white clouds. I don't think curly hair looks good on me, and I don't quite cherish the thought of looking all fat and chubby for the rest of eternity. If heaven is like this, then thank you very much.

The picture of heaven that we know from Scripture is so much more! Every joy, every pleasure we receive, everything of beauty on earth is supposed to remind us that this is but a pale shadow of heaven. Even every tear, every sorrow, every pain, every farewell we say to someone we love, should be reminding us of the promise in Rev 21:4 that there will come a day when God will wipe every tear from our eyes. And if that is still not enough for you to long for heaven, there is the promise of the highest honour and privilege that I can imagine for us—that we who are redeemed by the blood of Jesus, and made righteous under his blood, we will see God face to face (Rev 22:4). Even the angels in the book of Revelation is described as having to cover their faces with their wings before God because God is too holy to behold, but we are given the promise that we will see God face-to-face. In the words of an old hymn: Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace. If we ourselves are not too sure what heaven's going to be like, how are we ever going to get others excited about heaven?

3) The rich man's achievements, status, and race did not get him into heaven. Translate that into our Christian walk; it is not what we have achieved for the church, what positions we held in church, or the fact that we are members of a church, that will save us. Don't get me wrong, these are all good things but it is not about us doing more or even doing anything to make God love us any more or less. The Lazarus in our story doesn't do a thing, he doesn't say a word. However significantly, Lazarus means "the one God helps". There is salvation in no one else apart from Jesus! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Lazarus accepted that help because he knew there was no way he could help himself. It wasn't anything he had done, it was the position of his heart towards God. What is the position of your heart towards God today?

Have you accepted the gift of God that is in Christ Jesus and have acknowledged the lordship of Jesus over your life or have you just been doing stuff?

Let me pray for us. Lord, for those of us who feel that our hearts are hard, I pray that you will put a new heart and a new spirit in us. Remove from us our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh so that our hearts will be turned towards you. For those of us with a dim vision of heaven, whether it is because the cares of this world has turned the lights down for us, or because heaven just seems too far off, Lord restore to us your vision of heaven. For the sake of Jesus. Amen.